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Middle Managers' Regulation of the Emotions of Others in Strategy Implementation: A Process Perspective

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ABSTRACT This article develops a process model of how middle managers regulate the negative emotions of their team members to support strategy implementation. Based on a 9-month ethnographic study in a public broadcasting company, we examine how managers navigate emotionally charged resistance to top-down strategic themes during meetings. While prior research emphasizes individual techniques, we show that emotion regulation of others (ERO) unfolds as a sequenced process involving three interconnected phases: understanding emotional status, interpersonal tuning, and encouraging reappraisal. Our findings highlight that emotional influence is not achieved through isolated tactics, but through temporally coordinated and relationally attuned practices. In doing so, the study reconciles the tension between validating negative emotions and enabling emotional change. It advances research on middle managers by theorizing how they navigate emotional resistance in real time and contributes to ERO theory by demonstrating the importance of temporal coordination between validation and reappraisal.

Keywords: emotion regulation of others (ERO), ethnography, middle managers, strategy implementation, workplace emotions

INTRODUCTION

Middle managers play a central role in shaping how strategic ideas and initiatives are received and acted upon, and thus have a major influence on strategy implementation (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Tarakci et al., 2023; Weiser et al., 2020). Recent research has highlighted

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the critical role emotions play in this process, revealing that both positive and negative emotions surface as middle managers navigate strategy implementation (Huy, 2011; Vuori and Huy, 2016). This involves emotion regulation, that is, how middle managers regulate the emotions of themselves and others in these processes (Huy, 2011; Huy and Zott, 2019; Vuori, 2024; Vuori and Huy, 2016).

In this paper, we concentrate on how middle managers support strategy implementation by regulating the negative emotions of their team members in strategy meetings – key forums where various strategic themes are discussed and translated into action. In these settings, team members often express emotionally charged resistance to top-down strategies. Middle managers must manage this resistance in ways that enable emotional shifts toward engagement. However, this creates a conundrum: Research consistently shows that when employees express negative emotions, the appropriate response is validation and empathy, and not directly attempting to change those emotions, which can lead to adverse relational and performance outcomes (Bradley et al., 2024). Yet, successful strategy implementation often depends on precisely such emotional reorientation.

Thus, the challenge lies in how middle managers can simultaneously validate implementation-resisting emotions while also transforming them into enthusiasm and commitment toward the implementation. The existing literature offers no clear answer to this question. Research on emotion regulation (ER) suggests that emotionally skilled middle managers can influence the emotions of others (Huy, 2002; Huy and Zott, 2019; Vuori and Huy, 2022). However, much of the existing research has focused on isolated emotion regulation techniques, leaving open the question of how different techniques might be combined and sequenced in practice. This is particularly problematic in light of the findings of Bradley et al. (2024), who show that attempts to directly change others' emotions can be ineffective and counterproductive (see also Melhem et al., 2025). These findings challenge strategy research that recommends such techniques to overcome resistance (e.g., Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017). Emerging work suggests that emotional change may depend on the timing and sequencing of regulation efforts rather than the use of any single tactic (Bradley et al., 2024; Renault and Tarakci, 2023; Vuori and Huy, 2022). Hence, we ask the following research question: How do middle managers regulate the negative emotions of their team members in meetings to facilitate successful strategy implementation?

We explore this question by pursuing a theory-elaborating qualitative field study of strategy implementation in a major North European public service broadcasting company operating in TV, radio, and online journalism. While the company enjoyed a stable operating environment in the past, the rapid shift from traditional TV and radio broadcasting to digital services has posed challenges. Our qualitative study examines how middle managers regulate emotions in strategy meetings, the key site where strategic themes are discussed and translated into concrete implementation steps. We study how middle managers regulated the negative emotions of others (i.e., emotion regulation of others, hereafter ERO) as they made sense of three strategic themes originating from the top management team (TMT).

Our study makes two main contributions. First, we contribute by outlining the sequential nature of middle-managerial ERO, moving beyond prior research that has

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primarily focused on isolated emotion regulation practices and their average effects (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2008; Rauch and Ansari, 2025; Troth et al., 2018). We demonstrate that middle managers follow a process where they first acknowledge, then validate, and finally reappraise negative emotions before guiding these emotions toward more constructive, strategy-promoting outcomes. As we explain the mechanisms that link these different ERO phases, we deepen theory on the emotion regulation performed by middle managers during strategy implementation (Huy, 2002; Huy and Zott, 2019; Vuori and Huy, 2016). Second, we specify and describe detailed ERO practices that occur during strategy meetings, highlighting how middle managers engage in three key phases: understanding ER status, interpersonal ER tuning, and encouraging emotional reappraisal of the strategic theme. These insights reveal how middle managers skillfully navigate emotional dynamics to translate strategy into action. In so doing, we provide much-needed detail on how various contextual demands, including the unfolding content and dynamics of the application context, shape the relatively abstract ERO practices recognized by prior research (Bradley et al., 2024; Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Renault and Tarakci, 2023). These contributions extend strategy implementation research by clarifying how middle managers help overcome emotional resistance in real time (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Tarakci et al., 2023). It also contributes to emotion regulation literature by theorizing how emotional validation and reappraisal can be reconciled through sequenced, dynamic regulation efforts (Bradley et al., 2024; Troth et al., 2018; Vuori and Huy, 2022).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Middle Managers and Strategy Implementation

Successful strategy implementation depends greatly on how middle managers interpret top-down strategic ideas and make sense of them in their teams. Middle managers play a pivotal role in translating the strategic objectives set by senior management into operational tasks that align with team members' responsibilities and goals (Balogun and Rouleau, 2017; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005). This is not without its challenges, as middle managers may need to occupy complex and sometimes paradoxical positions, acting as both enablers and obstacles to strategic change (Tarakci et al., 2023). A frequent hurdle that middle managers face is the negative emotional reactions from their teams when encountering new strategic themes. These emotions – whether rooted in fear, scepticism, or frustration – can significantly impede progress, stalling the implementation of strategies and diminishing overall motivation to drive the change forward (Huy, 2002; Vuori and Huy, 2016). When faced with such emotional resistance, it becomes essential for middle managers to do more than just explain the cognitive reasoning behind the strategy – they must also address and regulate the emotional states of their teams.

This emotional work is a critical, yet often underappreciated, aspect of middle managers' responsibilities. Middle managers need to manage team members' emotional responses to ensure that strategic themes are not only understood but also emotionally

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embraced, enabling engagement and buy-in (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Huy and Zott, 2019). Research has increasingly highlighted the importance of emotionally skilled managers who can influence the emotions of others to facilitate alignment with strategic goals (Brundin et al., 2022; Huy, 2002; Vuori and Huy, 2022). Failures in emotion regulation can, in turn, undermine core routines such as performance appraisals (Melhem et al., 2025), emphasizing the need to understand how regulation unfolds in practice. However, as Vuori and Huy (2022) point out, emotion regulation in strategic settings is not a one-off or isolated act, but a temporally extended process. They argue that its effectiveness depends not only on which emotion-regulation techniques are used, but on the timing, sequencing, combination, and rhythm of these actions as they unfold in interaction over time. Nevertheless, they do not specify how these should be done, nor do they elaborate on the related mechanisms in sufficient detail. Thus, their insights invite closer attention to how emotion regulation unfolds moment-by-moment in real-time organizational interaction.

Emotion Regulation of Others

Emotion regulation (ER) refers to an individual's ability to manage their own emotional experiences (Gross, 1998). Emotion regulation of others (ERO) extends this concept by focusing on how individuals influence the emotional states of others in social and organizational contexts (Huy and Zott, 2019). Specifically, ERO is often performed by middle managers as they manage team members' emotions during critical organizational processes, such as strategy implementation. Middle managers use a range of strategies to regulate emotions, including comforting, reframing, or validating team members' emotional responses (Troth et al., 2018). Several management studies have examined the role of emotions in strategic contexts. For example, Huy (2002) explored how middle managers' emotional commitment affects strategy implementation. Vuori and Huy (2016, 2022) emphasized the impact of shared negative emotions, such as fear, on organizational rigidity during strategic transitions. These studies highlight the critical role middle managers play in managing emotional dynamics during strategy implementation.

ER, and by extension ERO, is deeply rooted in appraisal theories of emotion, which argue that emotions arise from individuals' appraisals of events in relation to their goals and values (Lazarus, 1991; Scherer and Moors, 2019). These appraisals influence individuals' core affect, which consists of two dimensions: valence (positive or negative) and arousal (intensity) (Russell and Barrett, 1999). Gross's (1998) model of ER categorizes strategies into two broad types: antecedent-focused approaches (e.g., situation selection, attention deployment) and response-focused approaches (e.g., suppression). In organizational contexts, scholars have highlighted the benefits of reappraisal as an emotion regulation approach (e.g., Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Vuori and Huy, 2022), indicating that middle managers should seek to alter how team members perceive strategic themes and, thus, make them feel more positive about them.

However, a recent review by Bradley et al. (2024) highlights that validation – the act of acknowledging and accepting others' emotions – is often the most effective response to emotional expressions in the workplace. Attempts to change someone's emotional state directly, in

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contrast, frequently lead to adverse outcomes such as diminished task performance (Holman and Niven, 2019), weakened relationships (Little et al., 2012), and reduced team creativity and information exchange (Troth et al., 2018). This is noteworthy given that much of the strategy literature continues to promote reappraisal, changing how people think about a situation, as a key managerial tactic. For example, Healey and Hodgkinson (2017) advocate reappraisal as central to effective emotion regulation. However, Bradley et al. (2024) caution that reappraisal can be counterproductive, underscoring the need for a more nuanced and sequenced approach to regulating emotions. They argue that the field's focus on discrete emotion regulation techniques, such as validation or reappraisal, has obscured how these strategies might be meaningfully combined in practice.

Vuori and Huy (2022) and Renault and Tarakci (2023) similarly emphasize the importance of emotional timing and sequencing. This is an important insight: effective emotion regulation often depends not only on what is done but also on when it is done. In their study of agile teams in a nursing unit, Renault and Tarakci show how effective leaders first acknowledge emotional distress before fostering team-level positivity, reinforcing the idea that successful emotional transitions are phased rather than instantaneous. Taken together, these insights highlight a key challenge for middle managers: emotional work in strategy implementation is rarely linear or one-dimensional, and middle managers often need to employ multiple emotion regulation techniques to manage complex emotional dynamics during strategy implementation (see also Grodal et al., 2015; Heaphy, 2017; Satterstrom et al., 2021). Understanding how these techniques interact, reinforce, or counteract each other is still not well theorized in existing research. This study addresses that need by investigating how middle managers regulate others' emotions within strategy meetings, settings where implementation work is negotiated and contested in real time. While our primary focus is not on meetings as a formal object of study, they constitute the central arena where strategic themes are introduced, discussed, and emotionally navigated. We therefore treat meetings not as isolated events but as recurring and consequential sites where ERO unfolds through communicative practice (Balogun et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008).

METHODS

Data Collection

Our analysis is based on a revelatory qualitative case study that elucidates the role of middle-managerial emotional regulation of others in meetings about strategy implementation. Our empirical context is a national broadcasting company in a North European country. In recent years, the company underwent a radical change process both externally and internally. The new strategy involved fundamental changes in the production of TV series, films, and radio programmes. We were fortunate to gain full access to discussions of these changes as the company developed and implemented its new strategy. This access enabled an intensive nine-month ethnographic study by two of this paper's authors, focusing specifically on strategy meetings where top management's strategic plan was translated into concrete strategic themes and responded to by middle managers, many of whom were producers and journalists.

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Table I. Overview[a] of data collected per focal middle manager and unit

Focal middle manager and unit	*Business description*	*Observed and video-recorded meetings*	*Interviews*	*Shadowing events*
MM 1 – Investigative Journalism	Production of TV and radio programmes through deep research of societal themes	13	15 (10 Drivers; 5 Receivers)	20 (5 Driver-only; 15 Mixed)
MM2 – Fact as Entertainment	Production of TV and radio programmes blending factual and entertainment formats	12	16 (13 Drivers; 3 Receivers)	59 (41 Driver-only; 18 Mixed)
MM3 – Documentary Journalism	Production of documentary-style TV and radio content on narrow topics	9	12 (10 Drivers; 2 Receivers)	9 (7 Driver-only; 2 Mixed)
MM4 – Entertainment Programmes	Production of light-format TV and radio entertainment content	8	11 (9 Drivers; 2 Receivers)	23 (13 Driver-only; 10 Mixed)
MM5 – Talk Show Programmes	Production of talk-based TV and radio formats	6	6 (5 Drivers; 1 Receiver)	5 (4 Driver-only; 1 Mixed)
Strategy Department (No MM)	Oversight of strategic planning across departments	4	4 (4 Drivers)	–
Total	**–**	**52**	**64**	**116**

[a]Internal documents and strategic materials were also consulted to contextualize the primary data but are not included in the table, as they were not analysed systematically.

These meetings served as the central arena for observing the emotional dynamics of strategy implementation.

To examine ERO in context, we followed one focal middle manager per unit across different meeting types, where they interacted with producers and journalists. While we also shadowed these middle managers in informal settings (e.g., corridor conversations and lunches), our analysis centres on video-recorded meetings, where emotional responses were expressed and regulated publicly. Our dataset (see Table I) includes 52 video-recorded strategy meetings (our core material), complemented by 64 semi-structured interviews, 116 shadowing events, and supporting internal documents and intranet discussions. The data span five content-producing departments and the central strategy unit, offering rich material for analysing how emotional regulation unfolds in the everyday practice of strategy implementation.

Meetings observed. We observed 52 strategy meetings in which our focal middle managers participated, and where strategic themes were discussed. On average, the meetings had six participants, and they lasted between one and 3 hours. They were either weekly or monthly team meetings or one-off meetings focused on a strategic theme. In both types,

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producers and journalists worked on developing the strategic themes to be implemented for new TV, radio, and digital productions.

We observed the meetings on-site in real-time and video-recorded them. The video data enabled us to go back and double-check turn-takings and embodied attention-directing behaviour (Gylfe et al., 2016). All meeting participants were visible in the video. The video camera was set up in a corner of the meeting room and was kept there to avoid disruption. Participants, being media professionals, were comfortable with being filmed, minimizing the influence of observation.

Interviews. We conducted 64 interviews, each lasting 40–75 minutes. These interviews followed and complemented the meeting observations. Rather than general questions, we used specific episodes from meetings to prompt reflection, for example, asking why a journalist had resisted a proposal or why a producer had stayed silent. This approach allowed us to unpack the participants' interpretations, emotional reactions, and reflections on strategic themes. We also explored how meeting dynamics influenced subsequent engagement with the themes. The interviews included producers, journalists, heads of departments, and strategy team members. 81% of interviewees were male.

Shadowing events. We also shadowed the focal middle managers in informal contexts such as corridor talk, lunch, coffee breaks, and car rides. These informal discussions provided complementary data on how strategic themes were negotiated beyond formal settings. We observed who led such conversations, how emotional undercurrents persisted or shifted, and whether alignment increased or decreased. In total, we conducted 116 shadowing sessions ranging from 20 to 65 minutes, most of which were video-recorded.

Documents. We collected internal documents, intranet discussions, strategic plans, presentations, and budgets to provide background information and contextualize our qualitative data. These materials helped us situate specific meetings and events within broader strategic goals, enhancing our understanding of participants' reactions.

Analysis

We followed established qualitative analysis techniques (Charmaz, 2006; Miles and Huberman, 1994) and video-ethnography methods (Gylfe et al., 2016) to analyse the data. Our analysis was guided by recent research on emotions (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Hodgkinson and Wright, 2002; Huy and Zott, 2019; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Vuori and Huy, 2016, 2022) and further informed by core affect theory (Russell and Barrett, 1999) and appraisal theory (Scherer and Moors, 2019). More specifically, our analysis proceeded in six steps.

Step 1. Identifying key themes. As we processed our qualitative data, we identified strategic themes that emerged in discussions during our 9-month period of observation, focusing specifically on the early stages of top-down implementation. We defined strategic themes as those central to the recent strategy of the broadcasting company and used

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research on strategic issue diagnosis to support our identification (Dutton, 1993; Dutton et al., 1983; Ocasio et al., 2018; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). After multiple iterations of our analysis and three meetings with the vice president for strategy and the director of the strategy department, we prioritized three strategic themes that were most critical and widely discussed across all departments: (1) digitalization, (2) quicker decision-making, and (3) customer focus. These themes represented key aspects of top-down strategy implementation and were actively driven by the top management team (TMT) across the organization. They were not only prioritized by TMT but also proved to be particularly controversial and emotionally charged, requiring middle managers to engage in active emotion regulation to facilitate implementation. For example, digitalization sparked widespread anxiety and resistance as employees feared they lacked the necessary skills to adapt to new technologies. Quicker decision-making created tension around work processes, as employees felt pressure to prioritize speed over quality. Customer focus raised concerns among journalists, who believed an emphasis on audience metrics conflicted with their editorial values. As these strategic themes frequently triggered strong negative emotional responses, they were ideal for exploring how middle managers regulated emotions to align their teams with the organization's objectives.

Step 2. Open coding: identifying first-order codes. We then proceeded to examine how the people made sense of these key themes. We started our microlevel analysis with a focus on the informants' language, that is, the words and phrases they used, and the embodied interaction cues as they pursued and experienced the strategic themes (STs). We generated a broad range of first-order codes that captured instances where participants expressed concern about the strategy's disconnect from their daily work or where middle managers listened to expressions of frustration. For instance, when employees voiced concerns over shifting timelines and fears of losing audience share, which we coded as concerns linked to strategic pressures.

Step 3: Thematic analysis: developing sub-themes. As our analysis progressed, we used constant comparison and memo-writing techniques to refine and cluster the first-order codes into sub-themes that captured emerging patterns in the meetings we observed. To avoid confusion, we note that these analytical sub-themes should not be conflated with the empirical strategic themes discussed in the organization's meetings. This iterative process helped us reduce complexity and overlap among the codes, ensuring that our analysis remained centred on the discussions, interactions, and emotional dynamics that unfolded in strategy meetings. For instance, we identified how members' frustration about shifting timelines often reflected broader organizational fears about failing to meet the strategic targets set by the top management team (TMT). Follow-up interviews helped us verify these connections, clarifying that negative emotional responses observed in the meetings were not merely personal reactions but were tied to organization-wide pressures. The interviews were crucial in contextualizing and deepening our understanding of the emotional exchanges that took place in the meetings. For example, after witnessing strong reactions during a meeting, we asked follow-up questions about their reactions and thoughts on the strategic issue to explore the underlying concerns driving these

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emotional expressions. Through this iterative process – focusing first on meetings, then supplementing observations with interviews and shadowing – we built toward the central theoretical focus that linked these emotional reactions to broader organizational processes. This ultimately led us to focus on the concept of emotion regulation in the context of meetings on strategy implementation.

Step 4. Coding for emotions. In coding for emotions, we analysed informants' emotional expressions in relation to their strategic appraisals, drawing on prior work such as Liu and Maitlis (2014) and Gylfe et al. (2016). We examined how emotional responses emerged within meetings by attending to verbal content, vocal tone, and gestural behaviour, capturing both explicit statements and embodied cues.

To ensure analytical consistency, we relied on the core affect model (Russell and Barrett, 1999), which differentiates emotional experiences along the dimensions of valence (positive vs. negative) and arousal (low vs. high). This framework allowed us to distinguish between, for example, high-arousal negative emotions like frustration or anger and lower-arousal emotions like concern or confusion.

We developed emotion codes inductively and iteratively, while remaining anchored in the core affect framework. For example, employees who appeared frustrated – raising their voice, gesturing sharply, and using urgent or critical language – often appraised the strategic theme as misaligned with their professional values or day-to-day practices. Others displayed concern through more subdued cues such as hesitant speech, downward gaze, and restrained posture, suggesting uncertainty or moral ambivalence about the strategy. Similarly, enthusiasm was identified through nodding, softened tone, and verbal expressions of optimism, while contempt involved ironic phrasing, eye rolls, or sarcastic tone, often directed at perceived managerial detachment.

We triangulated these emotional readings across spoken dialogue, video-recorded non-verbal behaviour, and our broader ethnographic understanding of the setting. This approach helped us interpret not just what emotions were expressed, but how they functioned strategically – for example, contempt worked as resistance, social bonding, or humorous deflection, depending on the context. Emotions were thus coded contextually, with attention to the speaker's role, the surrounding conversation, and the strategic issue under discussion. The result was a structured yet flexible coding scheme that allowed us to track how emotion shaped the dynamics of strategy meetings over time. Table II summarizes the key emotions we identified, their associated appraisals of strategic themes, and the core affect expressions through which they were enacted.

Step 5. Linking emotional cues to strategic appraisals and coding for emotion regulation. To link observed emotional cues to strategic appraisals, we adopted Huy's (2011) appraisal-based approach, further refining it with Scherer and Moors's (2019) review and synthesis of appraisal processes. This dual approach enabled us to connect emotions directly to the participants' assessments of strategic themes. For instance, employees experiencing high levels of anxiety (negative valence, high arousal) often appraised strategic themes negatively, citing disconnects between the strategic vision and their day-to-day realities. The coding was further guided by established emotion regulation frameworks (Huy and Zott, 2019; Kaplan et al., 2014), which allowed us to track how middle managers' actions

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Table II. Examples of identified emotions, definitions of appraisal, and core affect expression

Emotion	*Type*	*Appraisal of strategic theme*	*Core affect expression (verbal and non-verbal cues)*	*Illustrative quote*
Anxiety	A high-arousal, unpleasant state of unease or lack of control	Uncertainty about how the ST will be implemented or its feasibility	Tense voice, fidgeting, rapid speech, furrowed brows	'We're missing a day or two in this production process. We don't know what to do!!'
Frustration	High-arousal emotion triggered by blocked goals or obstacles	Perceived barriers in implementing the ST or lack of progress	Raised voice, hand gestures, sighs, leaning forward aggressively	'We learned yesterday that we cannot deliver the content on time. This is a real problem!'
Concern	A low-to-mid arousal state reflecting worry or unease	Doubt about consequences or alignment of ST with values	Cautious tone, furrowed brow, pausing, hesitant body language	'The connection between the introduction and the music was a bit loose'.
Anger	High-arousal, unpleasant reaction to perceived injustice or constraint	Belief that ST is unfair or mishandled by others	Loud voice, direct eye contact, accusatory tone, stiff posture	'The marketing department and top management should be blamed for this mess!'
Confusion	Low-arousal, unpleasant state due to lack of clarity or contradiction	Uncertainty about ST structure or next steps	Pausing, furrowed brows, looking to others for cues, questioning intonation	'I need to ask you to explain this one more time. I'm not sure I'm following'.
Contempt	Mid-arousal, unpleasant emotion involving sarcasm or detachment	Belief that ST is pointless, disconnected from actual work	Smirking, eye-rolling, ironic phrasing, exaggerated tone	'Oh what joy to continue producing…as long as our managers don't think we're too annoying'.
Fear	High-arousal, unpleasant anticipation of negative consequences	Apprehension about failure or punishment related to ST	Shaky voice, wide eyes, shrinking posture, avoidance behaviours	'If we don't meet these KPIs, we might be in serious trouble with management'.
Enthusiasm	High-arousal, pleasant emotion expressing readiness to act	Positive recognition of the ST's relevance or progress potential	Leaning forward, excited tone, nodding, enthusiastic statements	'Yes! That's it! This will really help us move forward'.

– such as validating or reframing team members' emotions – shifted emotional appraisals across the organization. Additionally, we followed Vuori and Huy (2022) to identify emotion regulation of others (ERO) practices. Using theories of emotion regulation (Huy and Zott, 2019; Troth et al., 2018; Zaki, 2020), we coded instances where middle

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managers, typically as theme drivers, attempted to regulate the emotions of theme receivers by validating or reframing their frustrations, aligning them with strategic goals. We were particularly interested in interpersonal emotion regulation techniques, such as how middle managers acknowledged negative emotions like frustration before actively reshaping them to drive strategy implementation.

Step 6. Capturing the dynamics of emotion regulation: moving beyond static models. Our aim was to move beyond static models of emotion regulation (Huy and Zott, 2019) by capturing how middle managers regulated others' emotions as these dynamics unfolded in real time during meetings. While our ethnographic fieldwork extended over 9 months and included repeated observations of the same middle managers, our analytic focus remained on the moment-by-moment emotion regulation sequences within individual meetings, not across them. That is, although we followed middle managers longitudinally, our findings are grounded in the micro-interactions that occurred during discrete meetings, where strategic themes were interpreted, contested, and emotionally navigated. We followed Gross's (1998) emotion regulation process model (situation selection, attentional deployment, response modulation) to guide our analysis of temporal dynamics.

Importantly, the outcomes we analyse are not long-term behavioural implementation effects, but rather immediate emotional reappraisals – such as a shift in tone, agreement to proceed, or an expression of renewed motivation. These momentary shifts, while brief, represent meaningful progress within the broader strategy process: they help sustain emotional momentum, restore interpersonal trust, and enable continued engagement with contested strategic themes (Heaphy, 2017; Satterstrom et al., 2021). Therefore, we treat these localized emotional shifts not as endpoints, but as important micro-foundations of strategic change. We also note that not every meeting featured the full three-phase process. Many included multiple phases or partial sequences of ERO practices. By comparing numerous short episodes across 52 meetings, we were able to abstract a recurring pattern of emotional responses and regulatory interventions, which formed the basis for our theorization of the three-phase ERO model. These categories form the basis of our data structure (Figure 1) and are elaborated further in Table III. By zooming in on the fine-grained sequences of emotion regulation in strategy meetings, our analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the emotional micro-foundations of strategy implementation.

FINDINGS

Our analysis reveals that during strategy meetings, middle managers regulate their team members' emotions in three stages: understanding ER status, interpersonal ER tuning, and encouraging emotional reappraisal of the strategic theme. Each ERO stage involves distinct ERO practices. In what follows, we go through all three ERO stages and provide examples of each ERO practice. We also provide two longer ethnographic examples where groups experience all three stages of the ERO process sequentially.

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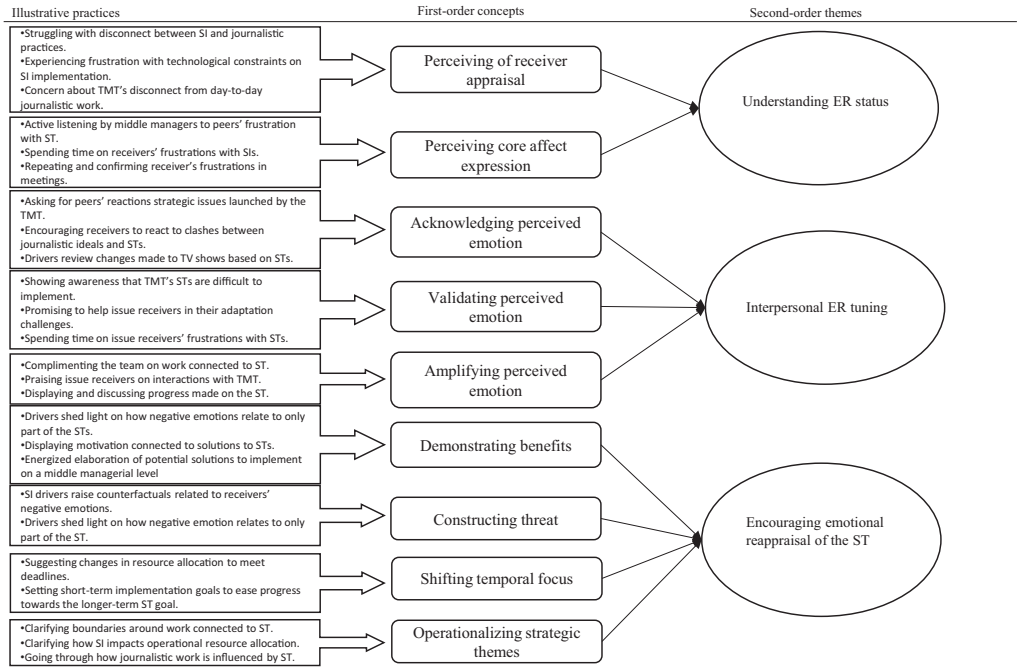

Figure 1. Data structure

Understanding ER Status

The first stage of our process model, understanding ER status, involves how theme drivers engage in ERO practices to understand the emotions of other participants. We categorized the emotional dynamics into two main components: perceiving receiver appraisal and perceiving core affect expression. Table IV presents examples of how middle managers identify underlying emotions, such as frustration or contempt, expressed through verbal cues and embodied interactions like louder voices or expressive gestures when they introduce emotionally charged strategic themes. These examples illustrate how the strategic themes trigger different emotional responses, emphasizing the importance of context-specific ethnographic analysis in identifying nuanced emotional states. For instance, in one episode (Example 1 in Table IV), Maria's sarcastic tone and expressive behaviours, such as frowning and a louder voice, signal frustration and contempt in response to a discussion about customer focus. The embodied cues, including an intense gaze, reveal her dissatisfaction with the strategic theme, demonstrating how her appraisal of the theme is shaped by her emotional engagement with it. Below, we offer illustrative examples that are not outlined in the tables but provide deeper insights into the emotion regulation process.

Perceiving Receiver Appraisal and Core Affect Expression

Example #1: Pete engages in the first stage of ERO by encouraging Mats to share his feelings on the strategic theme (ST) of quicker decision-making.

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Table III. Overview of ERO practices, related concepts, and effects

ERO practice	*Related concepts*	*Explanation*	*Effect*	*Enables further emotion regulation*
Understanding ER status: Perceiving of receiver appraisal	Theory of mind, perspective taking, cross-understanding	We combine verbal appraisals with embodied cues during strategic meetings, capturing emotionally charged evaluations of strategic themes.	Surfaces emotionally charged responses to strategic themes.	Surfaces emotionally charged responses to strategic themes.
Understanding ER Status: Perceiving Core Affect Expression	Facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen, 2003), Core Affect (Russell and Barrett, 1999)	We extend Russell & Barrett by linking embodied cues (tone, posture, gestures) to strategic content, allowing real-time tracking of emotional intensities. While Ekman and Friesen (2003) emphasized universal facial expressions as indicators of discrete emotions, we build on this by examining how facial and bodily cues emerge dynamically in response to strategic content during meetings.	Reveals the intensity and valence of emotional responses.	Helps identify emotional engagement type and guides subsequent ERO practices.
Interpersonal ER tuning: Acknowledging perceived emotion	Affect Labelling	Noticing emotion is a no change reaction. Our contribution is to show how this minimal involvement still shapes the emotional field of strategy meetings.	Makes the emotion visible and socially acknowledged.	Establishes a shared frame for deeper emotional engagement.
Interpersonal ER tuning: Validating perceived emotion	Emotion Validation; Empathy	Validating emotion reflects high engagement but no change in. Public acknowledgement lowers arousal and builds trust.	Legitimatizes emotion in the conversation.	Encourages openness and enables emotion transformation later.
Interpersonal ER tuning: Amplifying perceived emotion	Upregulation (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017)	Amplifying emotion builds on Healey and Hodgkinson's (2017) notion of upregulation, encouraging deeper reflection and team bonding. It strengthens trust and collective attention (Bradley et al., 2024; Vuori and Huy, 2022) by using emotion as a social glue in strategy meetings.	Deepens appraisal and broadens group engagement.	Enables collective meaning-making and sets stage for constructive reappraisal.

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Table III. (Continued)

ERO practice	*Related concepts*	*Explanation*	*Effect*	*Enables further emotion regulation*
Encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST: Demonstrating Benefits	Cognitive Reappraisal (Gross, 1998); Framing	While Huy and Zott (2019) discuss reward-related reappraisal as an individual tactic, we show how it can be applied interpersonally to reframe negative emotion around strategic themes.	Shifts emotion toward a constructive outlook.	Creates cognitive-emotional space for motivation.
Encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST: Constructing Threat	Problem Framing	Unlike cognitive threat framing, our approach integrates emotional tension and urgency in interaction to mobilize commitment (cf. Rouleau, 2005; Vuori and Huy, 2016).	Generates urgency and activates attention.	Encourages reorientation toward adaptive strategic responses.
Encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST: Shifting Temporal Focus	Temporal Framing; Emotion Trajectories	Huy and Zott (2019) describe time-based reappraisal as intrapersonal tactics; we demonstrate how shifting timelines is enacted dialogically to reduce frustration and enable enthusiasm.	Alters the perception of immediate emotional pressure.	Position emotional reactions in a broader strategic arc.
Encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST: Operationalizing Strategic Themes	Goal Setting; Translating strategy into shared practices	Operationalizing breaks down abstract strategic themes into shared, coordinated practices (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009), reducing emotional ambiguity and increasing perceived control (Gross, 1998).	Provides clarity and restores a sense of control.	Transforms negative emotions into constructive engagement.

Pete (Producer) [Driver] ST: Quicker decision-making: Go ahead [and tell me what you think]. [Eliciting a member's emotions].
Mats (Journalist) [Receiver]: (frowning, raising voice slightly, gesturing with hands) You know, my "news journalist" self, which is never going to disappear, makes me realize that the pace here allows us to pay close attention to detail. (gestures more sharply) I think that the other division is rather ineffective regarding these pressing themes. **[Frustration and concern]**

Mats's appraisal of the ST is that the TMT's insistence on quick decisions compromises journalistic quality, which is important to his work. As a result, Mats expresses his core affect-frustration and concern – through frowning, raising his voice, and waving his hands. This highlights for Pete a conflict between the need for speed and the emphasis on quality in journalism. Pete's elicitation prompts an emotional

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Table IV. Understanding ER status

Appraisal category	*Concept definition*	*Illustrative quotes*
Perceiving of receiver appraisal	Evaluating the relevance and implications of strategic themes for personal or group goals	*Example 1, ST: customer focus*: Jennifer (Producer) [Driver]: Can I give the word to our colleague? [*Eliciting members' emotions*] Because when we had decided to produce the first season, we had decided everything and made all the [necessary] investigations. *This prompts appraisal of the SI concerning customer focus* Maria (Journalist) [Receiver]: I don't think we have many problems with [big] egos in this group. We don't do these programs to get our own faces on the screen. **[Frustration**] *Frustration is indicated by a raised voice, sarcastic tone, and dismissive body language, such as leaning back and making abrupt hand gestures. Her fast-paced speech and narrowed eyes reinforce the emotional response*.
Perceiving core affect expression	Manifestation of the core affect through expressive behaviour, showing underlying emotional states	*Example 1, ST: customer focus*: Maria (Journalist) [Receiver]: I don't think this [strategic theme] is very difficult, if the program is great, then that is what counts. **[Contempt and Frustration]** *Contempt is evident in her sarcastic tone, dismissive phrasing, and slight smirk. Frustration is reflected in her fast-paced speech and exaggerated hand movements, suggesting impatience or dissatisfaction with the discussion* *Example 2, ST: quicker decision-making*: Helena (Producer) [Receiver]: It is the marketing department and the top management who should be blamed. They should do much more to get things forward! **[Anger]** *Anger is expressed through a sharp, loud voice, furrowed brows, and forceful hand movements. She leans forward aggressively and emphasizes words strongly, indicating a strong emotional reaction to the situation*.

reaction, clarifying how Mats evaluates the strategic theme not only cognitively but also emotionally:

Example #2. Pete encourages Jonathan and Sara to express their emotions about the customer focus ST promoted by the TMT.

> Pete (Producer) [Driver] ST: Customer focus: (smiling lightly, casual tone) This was the first program broadcast without a studio host… how do you think it worked? [Eliciting a member's emotions].
> Jonathan (Journalist) [receiver]: (silent, slight downward gaze, hesitant) Mmm.
> Sara (Journalist) [receiver]: (frowning, leaning slightly forward, voice tightening) The connection between the introduction and the music was a bit loose. **[Concern]**

Sara's appraisal of the strategic theme is that the push for customer focus is interfering with the coherence of the film's journalistic elements. When Sara remarks that the music did not fit the content, we initially treated this as a factual statement. However, upon closer analysis, we identified frustration based on her tone of voice and body language, such as speaking louder and frowning. Her concern and dissatisfaction are apparent in her core

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affect expression – frowning, gazing intensely at her peers, and leaning forward. By eliciting the group's feelings, Pete allows Sara to share and perceives her appraisal of the ST and articulates the emotional response it elicits. In some cases, theme drivers used questions to elicit participants' thoughts on the ideas linked to the themes, which in turn prompted emotional responses. For example, Pete's question, 'How do you think it worked?' invited Jonathan to reflect on the strategic idea of a programme without a studio host, which was a significant change in their usual production process. While this question seems to focus on Jonathan's thoughts, it provided space for emotional expression in an emotionally charged context, as the team was dealing with pressure to adapt to the TMT's strategic priorities.

Such questions often lead participants to express their underlying emotions, either through their verbal responses or embodied interaction cues (e.g., tone, facial expressions, and body language). Eliciting allowed theme drivers to gain valuable insight into the core affect and the related receiver appraisal that defined participants' emotional responses. Through eliciting, theme drivers prompted participants to reveal how they evaluated the relevance of strategic themes to their goals, highlighting the cognitive appraisal process (Scherer and Moors, 2019). It also surfaced core affect expressions – the emotional states that emerged because of those appraisals, manifested in physical and behavioural cues such as tone, gestures, and facial expressions (Russell and Barrett, 1999).

Interpersonal ER Tuning

Building on the recognition of emotional appraisals and core affect expressions in the first phase of ERO (understanding ER status), we identified a second set of emotion-response strategies that involved engaging with those emotions more directly, a process we label interpersonal ER tuning. As demonstrated in Table V, interpersonal ER tuning includes three key practices: acknowledging perceived emotion, validating those emotions, and amplifying them to encourage deeper appraisal and reflection. These examples illustrate how middle managers navigate emotional dynamics by recognizing both verbal and non-verbal cues, creating a foundation for emotional reappraisal.

Example #3. Johan responds to the anxiety and concern expressed by Anders regarding the ST about quicker decision-making. Anders had pushed for a prime-time broadcasting slot to attract more viewers (part of the customer focus ST) but encountered difficulties in preparing the programme on time.

> Anders (Journalist) [Receiver] ST: Quicker decision-making: (defensive posture, furrowed eyebrows, avoiding eye contact) We learned yesterday that we cannot deliver the content on time. We have a problem with the source legitimacy. This is a real problem since we've thrown out the news [from this slot]. Now we don't know what to do!! **[Anxiety and concern]**
> Jonas (Journalist) [Driver]: (nodding, slightly lowered tone) Yeah so we're again running into trouble with the other department. We're in serious trouble with this. [Noticing and validating emotion].

Anders shows anxiety and concern about missing the broadcast window. Jonas demonstrates *noticing and validation* by agreeing with Anders's concerns and empathizing with his

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Table V. Interpersonal ER tuning

ERO practice	*Concept definition*	*Illustrative quotes*
Acknowledging perceived emotion	Acknowledging the emotions expressed by others, showing empathy or understanding	*Example 1, ST: customer focus*: Mark (Journalist) [Receiver]: We had really big problems getting the material squeezed into the timeslot that we had. Damn we were struggling with this. **[Frustration]** *Frustration is evident in his exasperated phrasing and emphasis on difficulty, while overwhelm is signalled by his painful expression, downward gaze, and slowed speech, suggesting mental strain and a sense of being burdened by the task.* Steven (Journalist) [Driver]: But the end product turned out really nice! [Providing positive feedback] *Steven's response shows involvement with Mark's expressed emotion by acknowledging the struggle and offering reassurance.* Pete (Producer) [Driver]: Yes, it was a struggle, [Attending to **Frustration**] but in the end it turned out well. *Pete acknowledges both the difficulty of the situation and the positive outcome, demonstrating deep involvement with the expressed emotions of his colleague.* Mark [relaxed]: Nice to know that you felt it was ok. *Mark's reaction indicates that he feels understood and supported, illustrating the effectiveness of the involvement with his expressed emotion.* *Example 2, ST: digitalization*: Harry (Producer) [Receiver]: I think it's a bit harmful that they think we hadn't done our work on launching things on the web first [strategic theme] earlier! This is about their power struggles! **[Frustration and Contempt]** *Frustration is reflected in his louder voice and intense gaze, while contempt is evident in his dismissive tone, implying scepticism about the motives behind the strategic push.* Kathryn (Executive producer) [Driver]: Yesterday in our meeting with the TV crew, it started out wrong [Attending to **Frustration**], but you guys were really good [Providing positive feedback] at getting your message [on how the SI is implemented in your division] through! *Kathryn shows involvement with Harry's expressed emotion by recognizing the initial frustration and validating the effort made, which helps in empathizing with his situation.*
Validating perceived emotion	Internalizing the emotional states expressed by others, leading to cognitive appraisal and empathy	*Example 1, ST: quicker decision-making*: Adam (Head of Department) [Driver]: One of the problems was that we did not have clear goals from last year, people did not know what last year's goals were. [**Confusion and Frustration**] *Confusion is indicated by his wavering tone and gestural cues (waving hands, furrowed brow), while frustration is expressed through his intense gaze and exasperated phrasing, signalling dissatisfaction with the lack of direction.* John (Manager) [Receiver]: Yes, there was so much confusion last year about everything, so it doesn't really matter. [Validating **confusion**] *John's response demonstrates cognitive appraisal by recognizing and empathizing with the expressed confusion and frustration.*

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Table V. (Continued)

ERO practice	*Concept definition*	*Illustrative quotes*
Amplifying perceived emotion	Encouraging further appraisal and reflection on emotional states related to strategic themes	*Example 1, ST: customer focus*: Sofia (Journalist) [Driver]: I hope you get this [struggle to implement SI] sorted out, is there a chance that it will be solved? [Attending to **Frustration**] *Sofia encourages further reflection on the emotional impact of the struggle, seeking to support her colleague's frustration*. Anders (Journalist) [Receiver]: There is a small possibility.**[Enthusiasm** with hesitation] *Enthusiasm is present in his acknowledgment of a possible solution, but his hesitant phrasing and subdued tone suggest uncertainty about the likelihood of success*.

emotional state, reinforcing the shared understanding of the challenges. Jonas's response validates Anders's concern and reinforces his acknowledgement of the difficulties the team was facing, without immediately offering a solution. The following example illustrates how Eva not only validated but *amplified* the emotions expressed by Maria regarding the customer focus ST.

Example #4. The team has struggled to create programmes that appeal to both younger and older viewers.

> Maria, (Journalist) [Receiver] Customer focus SI: (raised voice, intense gaze, leaning forward, ironic) Could we for once do something, an event that is clearly only for young people, which would not even try to reach grannies. **[Frustration and Contempt]**
> Eva (Team leader) [Driver]: (nodding, supportive tone) You're right [Validating emotions]. When we look at this, there are no events for young people.
> Sarah (Journalist) [Receiver]: (animated tone, gesturing) [Feeling heard] We could start talking about "life values" and ethics; as things are now, the church somehow has a monopoly on talking about ethics [Amplifying frustration] […] Young people [a target of the ST] are interested in these things, but thus far we have only managed to capture a few of them. It would be wonderful to have more discussion about it.

Maria voices her frustration and contempt about how this balancing act compromised their focus on younger viewers. Eva responds by *validating* Maria's frustration and acknowledging the difficulty of the situation, but in doing so, she also encourages further reflection. Her comment gave the team a *feeling* of being *heard* and opened the space for other team members to amplify the conversation, and Sarah contributed further insights about the strategic theme. By validating Maria's emotions, Eva signalled that her frustration was not only acknowledged but also encouraged the team to engage more deeply with the underlying theme. This allowed Sarah to build on Maria's appraisal, expanding the discussion to how the team might address the broader ethical concerns of younger audiences. Eva's validation paved the way for Sarah to *amplify* Maria's emotion, making space for further discussion, and her contribution deepens the emotional and strategic conversation. Her remarks highlight that the team's frustration with the current ST has broader implications,

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leading to a more constructive reflection on how to address these challenges. By encouraging further reflection on the expressed frustration and concern, Eva and Sarah made the team *feel heard* and helped them engage more deeply with the emotional and strategic dimensions of the theme. *Acknowledging*, *validating*, and *amplifying* emotional responses enabled theme drivers to gain a deeper understanding of how participants appraised the strategic themes and expressed their core affect. By recognizing and engaging with emotions such as frustration, contempt, fear, and concern, middle managers demonstrated that they truly understood and took their colleagues' worries seriously. Hence, they were able not only to manage the emotional dynamics in the meeting but also to amplify those emotions, reinforcing their emotional bond with the theme receivers and encouraging further exploration and reflection. These ERO practices – encompassing acknowledging, validating, and amplifying – laid the foundation for further emotional reappraisal, as described by Bradley et al. (2024) and Gross (1998).

Encouraging Emotional Reappraisal of the ST

Finally, encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST focuses on how middle managers ultimately sought to influence their colleagues' negative emotions, seeking to shift perspectives and promote emotional reappraisal of both the emotions and the strategic theme itself. The process of encouraging emotional reappraisal involves various ERO practices that reframe strategic themes, helping participants shift from negative emotional states to more constructive engagement. As seen in Table VI, these ERO practices include demonstrating benefits, constructing threats, shifting the temporal focus, and operationalizing strategic themes. Each of these practices engages with both emotional and strategic dimensions, allowing theme drivers to alter participants' emotional states and enable productive reappraisals of the strategic theme.

Demonstrating benefits involved offering reassurance and reframing the situation to highlight the positive aspects of the SI.

Example #5. Peter alleviates Johan's frustration regarding his role in the ST about digitalization by reframing the situation, demonstrating the potential benefits of Johan's work for the strategic efforts:

> Johan (Journalist) [Receiver] ST: digitalization: (leaning back slightly, tense smile) If I've gotten this far, I probably don't need to go back to my old position [at the other company]? **[Frustration]**
> Peter (Producer) [Driver]: (laughing shortly, leaning forward, assertive tone) You can tell them to shove their contract [up their.]. I found some resources so we can invest in you (calmer tone, reassuring). It's up to me how we spend this money, it's for the digitalization [Demonstrating benefits], but we can move it toward your expertise. [Providing positive feedback].
> Johan: (relieved tone, relaxed posture) Awesome. Then I don't need to think about that anymore. (Agreeing on next steps).

This emotional reappraisal happened alongside a strategic reappraisal of Johan's role and contributions. Peter alleviates Johan's frustration and doubt regarding his

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Table VI. Encouraging emotional reappraisal of the ST

ERO practice	*Concept definition*	*Illustrative quotes*
Demonstrating benefits	Efforts to influence or alter the emotional state of others, either by providing reassurance, reframing the situation, or offering constructive feedback.	*Example 1, ST: quicker decision-making*: Linda (Journalist) [Receiver]: 'Oh what joy to continue producing, and if we're really lucky our input will even be published. As long as our managers don't think we are too annoying'. [**Frustration and Contempt**] *Her cynical tone, louder voice, and exaggerated gestures (waving hands, leaning back) indicate* ***contempt****, reflecting scepticism toward management's decisions. Simultaneously, her sarcastic phrasing and dismissive mannerisms express* ***frustration****, signalling irritation with the strategic process.* Pete (Producer) [Driver]: 'But the [managers] noticed that we had forgotten the crucial feature from the end product [Demonstrating benefits], so we need to give them one point for that'. *Pete attempts to shift Linda's perspective by reframing the managers' critique as constructive feedback, aiming to reduce* ***frustration*** *and address her* ***contempt*** *with a more balanced view of the situation.* Linda (Journalist) [Receiver]: 'So, you mean that our managers only got one minus point for that attitude problem [toward our work]'. **[Contempt]** *Her continued sarcastic tone and dismissive phrasing indicate lingering* ***contempt****, though her willingness to engage in the discussion suggests a potential softening of her stance.* *Example 2, ST: customer focus*: Lars (Journalist) [Receiver]: 'I was thinking about this the wrong way; I now understand what the idea is, that we would create a new anchor for the TV show, but I feel like we don't have enough time to do it'. **[Confusion and concern]** *His wavering voice, hand gestures, and hesitant phrasing reveal* ***confusion****, as he struggles to make sense of the theme. His worry about insufficient time signals* ***concern****, emphasizing his apprehension about execution feasibility.* Jennifer (Journalist) [Driver]: '[We look at] examples of broadcasting organizations that have a lot more funds'. [Demonstrating benefits] *Jennifer seeks to alleviate Lars's* ***concern*** *by offering a broader perspective, potentially enabling* ***enthusiasm*** *by illustrating how others have successfully navigated similar challenges.*
Constructing threat	Highlighting potential risks, dangers, or negative outcomes to alter the emotional state of others and influence their behaviour or decision-making.	*Example 1, ST: customer focus*: Anders (Journalist) [Driver]: 'We learned yesterday that we cannot deliver the content on time. We have a problem with the source legitimacy. This is a real problem since we've thrown out the news [from this slot]. Now we don't know what to do!' **[Fear]** *His rapid speech, raised voice, and distressed tone reflect* ***fear****, indicating concern over meeting deadlines. His sense of urgency and uncertainty about the next steps signal fear, underscoring the perceived severity of the theme.* Jonas (Journalist) [Receiver]: 'Yeah so we are again running into trouble with the different departments. We're in serious trouble with this'. [**Frustration and concern**] *Jonas reinforces the perceived challenge by expressing* ***frustration*** *over recurring departmental conflicts and* ***concern*** *about the implications, amplifying the urgency of the theme.*

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Table VI. (Continued)

ERO practice	*Concept definition*	*Illustrative quotes*
Shifting temporal focus	Reappraising emotions by supporting peers in understanding the unfolding of the strategic themes over time.	*Example 1, ST: digitalization*: Pete (Producer) [Receiver]: That's what we're lacking. We're missing a day or two in this production process. **[Frustration and concern]** *His louder voice, animated gestures (waving hands, leaning forward), and direct statement convey* ***frustration*** *over time constraints, while his reference to missing production days signals* ***concern*** *about its impact on deliverables.* Christina (Director) [Driver]: Your colleagues in the other department have allocated a couple of days extra work on visualizations. [Shifting temporal focus] You guys could also have an extra day. *By adjusting the timeline and offering additional resources, Christina redirects Pete's focus toward a longer-term perspective, enabling hope that the situation can be managed more effectively.* Pete: Our team would appreciate that [extra resource for the SI] a lot. [**Enthusiasm**] *His immediate positive response and shift in tone reflect increased hope and renewed motivation to engage with the strategic theme.* *Example 2, ST: quicker decision-making*: Peter (Producer) [Receiver]: What roles will the people who have had the decision-making power up until now play in the future? **[Confusion and concern]** *His sarcastic tone and rapid speech reveal confusion about the evolving power dynamics, while his direct questioning signals concern about how the changes will affect workflow and authority.* Lars (Director) [Driver]: They can be consulted sometimes [Shifting temporal focus]. *Lars shifts the focus to a future-oriented perspective, helping Peter reappraise his concern by implying continuity in some roles, which could reduce overwhelm about the transition.*
Operationalizing strategic themes	Reappraising emotions by helping peers break down and implement strategic themes in practical, actionable ways.	*Example 1, ST: digitalization*: Adam (Producer) [Receiver]: It is impossible to reach out to people younger than 45 with classical music **[Frustration and concern]** *His slow speech, frowning, and hand gestures express frustration with the perceived difficulty of the task, while his statement highlights concern about engaging a younger audience effectively.* Jennifer (Producer) [Driver]: What if we made a [new] webpage [for young audiences]? Then they could listen and learn in a way that they feel comfortable with [Operationalizing strategic themes]. *Jennifer shifts the discussion toward a concrete solution, attempting to replace frustration with motivation by offering an actionable way forward.* Catherine (Director) [Receiver]: Of course, yes, this is something they understand, let's start planning this! [Agreeing on next steps] **[Enthusiasm]**. *Her agreement and readiness to plan further signal a successful reappraisal and engagement with the strategic theme.* *Example 2, ST: quicker decision-making*: Johan (Producer) [Driver]: For once, I mean, for once, I really understood [in our business context] what was said in the [strategy] document [**Enthusiasm**] [Operationalizing strategic themes]. If people only want fine words and rhetoric in the strategy, that's really not good. *Johan expresses satisfaction (increased understanding) with the clarity of the strategy, highlighting the practical relevance of the document.* Stefan (Producer) [Receiver]: Yes, yes, I agree, and I think this is important, we can accept this path **[**Increased **enthusiasm]** [Agreeing on next steps]. *Stefan's agreement and acknowledgment of the strategy's clarity demonstrate a positive reappraisal, leading to increased motivation to support the strategic theme.*

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role in the digitalization SI by demonstrating the potential benefits of the strategic efforts, framing them as an opportunity for Johan's personal and professional development. By highlighting how Johan's work aligns with the goals of the strategic theme of digitalization, Peter manages to shift Johan's emotional state from frustration and uncertainty to a more constructive and optimistic outlook. Peter's material offer of financial resources serves as a tangible means to address Johan's concerns about his professional stability, but it is embedded within an emotional regulation strategy. The material solution reassures Johan, demonstrating that his expertise is valued, and he is offered prospects within digitalization. This combination of material resources with emotional validation helps transform Johan's negative emotions into motivation and a sense of support. Crucially, the material response is not presented in isolation but as part of Peter's broader emotional regulation strategy. The offer of resources serves to operationalize Johan's role in the ST, providing concrete support while simultaneously alleviating Johan's frustration and reorienting him toward a more positive engagement with the strategic theme. By using both emotional and material elements, Peter successfully navigates the dual task of emotional reassurance and practical problem-solving, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these elements in effective emotion regulation:

Constructing threat focused on emphasizing the risks or negative outcomes if the ST failed to move forward, thereby creating a sense of urgency or pressure.

Example #6. In a team discussion about tighter production schedules, Frank voices frustration and confusion about how quickly their decision-making would be assessed:

> Frank (Journalist) [Receiver] ST: quicker decision-making: (frowning, speaking hesitantly, slightly slower tone) I need to ask you to explain this one more time. What happens once we've created our team goals for this issue [quicker decision making]? At which meeting will the decision be made? I'm not sure I'm following. [**Frustration and Confusion**]
> Adam (Director) [Driver]: (nodding, speaking with a firm but encouraging tone) Ok, you need to choose 3 KPIs for these goals and they will be discussed at the next meeting. [Constructing threat] Would it help if I drew a clear timeline so that you're all following? [Shifting temporal focus].
> Frank (Journalist) [Receiver]: (relieved tone, slight smile) Yes, that would be really helpful. (Agreeing on next steps).

In this interaction between Frank and Adam, although Adam is primarily offering clarification, there is an underlying subtext that frames the situation as urgent and crucial for the progress of the ST. By emphasizing the need for clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that will be discussed at the next meeting, Adam is implicitly introducing the possibility of failure or delays if these steps aren't taken. This creates a subtle, yet effective, threat dynamic, that prompts Frank to respond positively by agreeing on the next steps. Adam's response can be seen as constructing a subtle sense of urgency, hinting at potential negative consequences if the KPIs are not in place for the next meeting. While it is not an overt threat, the emotional shift from confusion to focus shows how the implicit risk motivated Frank to take action.

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Shifting temporal focus in turn helped participants reframe emotions by encouraging them to consider the longer-term implications of the ST rather than focusing on immediate challenges.

Example #7. In this interaction between Sana and Magnus, Magnus effectively shifts the temporal focus to manage Sana's concern and confusion about the ST of appointing a spokesperson for the TV show.

> Sana (Journalist) [Receiver] ST: customer focus: (slightly raised eyebrows, questioning tone, cautious posture) I'd like to ask what this really is all about. Have we decided who the spokesperson will be? **[Confusion and Concern]**
> Magnus (Producer) [Driver]: (shaking head, speaking calmly and reassuringly) No no no, we have not yet decided about the process, we don't know who will be responsible, this is still just an idea. [Shifting temporal focus]. (leaning slightly forward, using a softer tone) If we go for this idea [choosing a spokesperson for the TV show], we won't start it immediately. We'd work ourselves into this idea, because we don't have the necessary time right now. (Tentative promise).
> Sana (Journalist) [Receiver]: (Silent nodding, relaxed shoulders) (Agreeing to next steps).

Magnus redirects Sana's focus away from immediate decision-making toward a future-oriented view of the process, emphasizing that the decision has not yet been made and that the team will take the necessary time before fully committing to the spokesperson role. Magnus alleviates Sana's confusion and concern about appointing a spokesperson by shifting her temporal focus, thereby facilitating both emotional and strategic reappraisal, moving from concert to acceptance of a more gradual decision-making process. His use of a tentative promise – that the idea will not be implemented right away – helps to manage the emotional pressure Sana might be feeling by providing both emotional reassurance and practical clarity. By delaying the timeline for making decisions and promising a gradual process, Magnus shifts the temporal focus to reduce the immediate pressure Sana feels. This dual approach addresses both the emotional concern (confusion and concern) and the material elements of strategy implementation, demonstrating how a tentative promise can function as part of emotional regulation by offering reassurance while addressing practical concerns.

Operationalizing strategic themes involved translating abstract STs into actionable steps that participants could implement in their day-to-day work. Such actionability influences appraisals of control in the situation, and the higher the sense of control, the more action-oriented and positive the emotions tend to become (Scherer and Moors, 2019).

Example #8. Sara Expresses Frustration about the Seemingly Abstract Digitalization ST.

> Sara (Journalist) [Receiver], SI: digitalization: (raised voice, leaning forward) This ST has been around for a long time; we worked on it for the last TV-series, too. It was during stage three of production. The management has always asked us to be more digital. **[Frustration]**

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> Vilde (Journalist) [Driver]: (calm voice, leaning forward) We just need to start with small steps, we need to know the basics of the digital tool; [Operationalizing strategic themes] we should avoid using the camera ineffectively. [Tentative promise].

Vilde redirects the conversation by suggesting small, manageable steps the team could take, such as integrating digital photography into their journalistic workflow. By breaking down the larger ST into feasible actions, Vilde helps Sara reappraise her emotions toward digitalization by breaking down the complex theme into small, tangible steps, leading to a shift from frustration to constructive motivation.

These practices – demonstrating benefits, constructing threat, shifting temporal focus, and operationalizing strategic themes – not only reshaped participants' understanding of the strategic themes but also encouraged reappraisal of their emotional responses. By reframing the situation strategically, theme drivers were able to regulate emotions, helping participants move from frustration, confusion, or concern to more constructive emotional states aligned with the strategic goals. As the examples show, encouraging emotional reappraisal of the strategic theme was a crucial phase in the emotion regulation process– but only after middle managers had first encouraged emotion sharing and validated the shared emotions. By providing feedback that either reassured, framed risks, contextualized the timing of actions, or offered practical solutions, theme drivers supported theme receivers in moving from emotionally charged reactions to a more constructive engagement with the strategic theme at hand.

Ethnographic Examples of how Emotion Regulation of Others Drives Emotional Reappraisal

We build on our ethnographic data to provide two longer examples that show how emotional regulation unfolds in the context of strategy implementation, emphasizing the importance of ERO practices. These examples enable us to show the three ERO practices described above in relation to one another and illuminate their interplay.

Example #9: Strategic Theme: Customer Focus.

For over a decade, the organization's top management team has been driving a customer-focused strategy aimed at reaching younger audiences with their TV programmes. Year after year, the broadcaster has lost viewers in younger demographics, partly due to on-demand streaming and digital services. In this first example, producer Iris, talk-show host Daniel, and journalist Tina meet to discuss improving the customer focus of their TV series. Iris's group has been pushed by top managers to follow TV programme viewer statistics closely as they evaluate progress on the strategic theme of customer focus. The group has analysed viewer statistics for many years, and they are increasingly frustrated by the fact that these statistics do not capture the quality of their work; they have not seen improvements in the statistics. Iris, a middle manager close to top management, acts as the theme driver, while Daniel and Tina are theme receivers. Daniel is clearly frustrated and angry by TMT's insistence that they put more emphasis on the customer focus strategy. From conversations with Daniel and Iris before and after the meeting, we learned that they considered their

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work very customer-focused, but that the statistical viewer evidence requested by the TMT did not bear this out. Daniel experiences negative emotion regarding TMT's demands for statistical evidence at the meeting. He straightens his back, adjusts his posture in the chair, gazes intensely at Iris, waves the statistics printouts in his hand, and then raises his voice:

> Daniel (Talk Show Host) [Receiver]: (straightens back, raises voice, waves papers)It seems pointless to promote our programs since the statistics always look the same. **[Frustration and Anger]**

Daniel expresses his anger at TMT's insistence on more statistics to prove customer focus. His *core affect* is revealed both through his words and his body language. It reflects his emotional evaluation of the strategic theme, where statistical evidence is perceived as insufficient and irrelevant to their journalistic work. Iris perceives Daniel's frustration and validates his concerns by acknowledging the challenge. She does not dismiss his feelings but recognizes the difficulty of using statistics to measure their journalistic success:

> Iris (Producer) [Driver]: (calm voice, leaning back) We need to figure out [a new way] to look at the statistics over time. [Noticing and validating frustration].
> Tina (Journalist) [Receiver]: (leaning back, looking away) Mmm…

Tina's silence and still posture suggest scepticism, signalling that she shares Daniel's frustration but is more reserved in her emotional expression.

> Iris (Journalist) [Driver] (leaning forward, eager voice): When I look at the previous statistics, the situation doesn't seem hopeless. [Demonstrating benefits].

Iris tries to reframe the situation by pointing out improvements of the statistics. She *demonstrates benefits* by emphasizing that the viewer statistics offer a way forward, shifting the conversation toward a more constructive perspective.

> Iris (Journalist) [Driver]: Could we somehow [in the measurements] analyze the popularity of the program across different demographic segments over time? **[Enthusiasm]** [Operationalizing strategic theme].

Iris operationalizes the ST by proposing a practical solution – analysing the statistics by demographic segment – which offers a more focused and actionable approach to meeting the customer focus goals. This helps Daniel and Tina see a clear way to implement the strategy.

> Daniel (Talk Show Host) [Receiver]: (leaning forward, raised voice, smiling) Yes, there it is, that's it! [Increased **enthusiasm** to promote SI].

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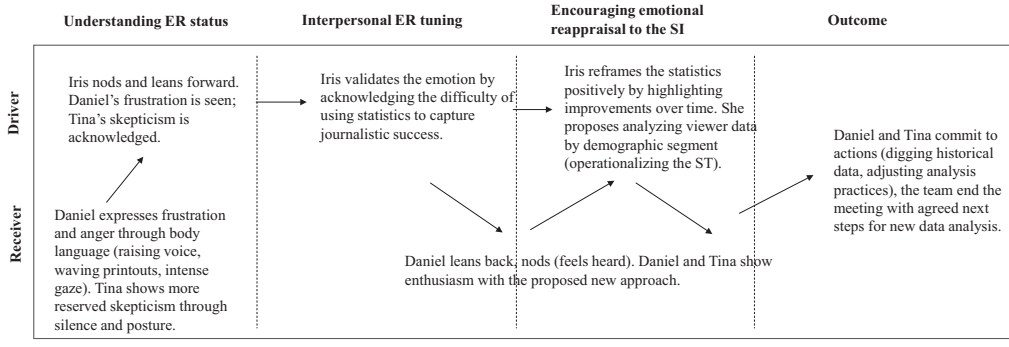
Tina (Journalist) [Receiver] (leaning forward, smiling): Yes, yes, I can dig out historical data combining those two [types of data]. [Increased **enthusiasm**] (Agreeing on next steps).

By *demonstrating benefits* and *operationalizing the strategic theme*, Iris helps the group reappraise their emotions toward the ST. While the group had previously used surface metrics provided by the broadcaster's statistics department, they had not considered analysing changes in viewer metrics across various demographic segments throughout the country. A more focused metrics analysis gave the group hope that they could provide evidence of their customer centricity. Daniel shows increased enthusiasm as he agrees with Iris that they have identified a new operational angle from which to advance the ST. In a similar vein, Tina expresses increased enthusiasm for promoting the next steps in the process as she explains how she could dig out particular types of customer data useful to the task. While at the outset of the meeting, the customer focus ST appeared difficult for Daniel and Tina to approach, they now reappraised their emotions. Because it is in line with the request from middle management to provide positive evidence that the journalists had increased customer centricity, the change in their emotions, that is, increased motivation to work with metrics, was crucial for the strategic implementation process. Figure 2 illustrates the detailed unfolding of ERO practices in the example.

Example #10: Strategic theme: Digitalization.

The TMT has prioritized digitalization across departments to match the faster adoption of digital elements by commercial film producers. This example features a discussion between producer Pete and director Christina about available resources to enhance digital elements in their investigative films. Our quotes show Pete in a meeting with Christina in which they discuss the resources available to improve the digital elements in the investigative film projects produced by the team. During the past year, Pete's group has sought to implement digitalization by improving the level of photography connected with investigative film



Context: Top management was pushing for a customer-focus strategy relying on viewer statistics. The sequence captures how the middle manager Iris (theme driver) helps her team emotionally reappraise their frustration about the strategic theme during a meeting.

Key roles in the sequence: Iris (Driver): Producer close to top management responsible for driving customer-focus theme. Daniel (Receiver): Talk-show host frustrated with management's statistical demands. Tina (Receiver): Journalist expressing reserved skepticism, later joining the reappraisal.

Figure 2. The unfolding and sequentiality of ERO in ethnographic example 9

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projects. The group has set goals to produce additional promotional content for their films by taking backstage photographs of 'filmmaking'. In this meeting, Pete (theme receiver), who is responsible for implementing digitalization during the next 12 months, sits down with Christina (theme driver) to discuss available resources. Christina is close to top management and has a mandate to reallocate resources across the organization to facilitate digitalization. Pete expresses anxiety about the challenges to his film production processes posed by enhanced digitalization and points out that the top management's timetable does not include time for implementation. He sighs, looks concerned, and speaks at a quicker pace.

> Pete (Producer) [Receiver]: ST digitalization (tense voice, furrowed eyebrows, quick pace): That's what we're missing. We're missing a day or two in this production process. **[Anxiety]**

Pete expresses the core affect of anxiety by the tight schedule for the next production phase. Top management also decides when films should be screened and there is often little flexibility for adjusting screening timetables. Christina nods and listens attentively with an air of understanding.

> Christina (Director) [Driver]: (Silent nodding) [Perceiving **Anxiety]**

Christina perceives Pete's emotion and acknowledges his concerns with non-verbal cues (nodding), showing that she understands his emotional state without immediately offering a solution.

> Christina (Director) [Driver]: (leaning forward, focusing on Pete): Your colleagues in the other department have allocated a couple of days for extra work on visualizations. [Validating, amplifying].
> Pete (Producer) [Receiver]: (Silent nodding).
> Christina: …you guys could also have an extra day. [Shifting temporal focus].
> Pete (leaning forward, excited tone): Our team would appreciate that [extra time for the ST] a lot. Yes! [**Enthusiasm** to promote ST].

Christina validates and amplifies Pete's negative emotions by sharing that other departments have also struggled with similar challenges but managed to find extra time, while also demonstrating that solutions are possible. Christina also *shifts the temporal focus* by proposing an additional day to complete the digitalization work, offering a tentative promise that provides Pete with the hope of more flexibility. This small change in the timeline significantly impacts Pete's perception of the ST, helping him reframe his emotions and promote the ST. Christina effectively uses validation and shifting temporal focus to help Pete reappraise his stress and frustration, transforming them into motivation and renewed commitment to digitalization. Pete becomes more motivated about the digitalization, leans back, nods, and says, 'Our team would appreciate that'. Christina and Pete end the meeting by reviewing the next steps in the resource allocation process. Pete continues to appear motivated as he transitions to tasks related to the production process. While at the outset of the meeting, Pete appeared frustrated about the

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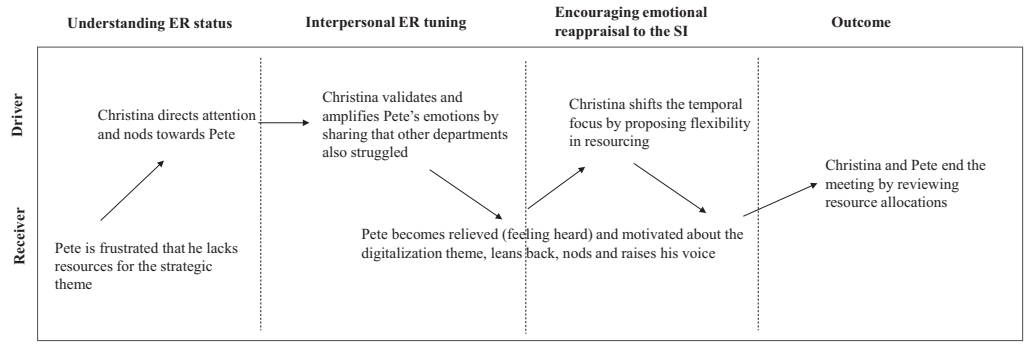

Context: The top management of organization is pushing parts of the organization to implement the 'Digitalization' strategy. The sequence captures exchange on the middle managerial level where employees struggle with implantation

Key roles in the sequence: Christina (driver), Director close to the top-management team with a mandate to use resources. Pete, (receiver), Producer influenced by the strategy struggling with implementation under limited resources.

Figure 3. The unfolding and sequentiality of ERO in ethnographic example 10

implementation of digitalization, Christina's ERO practices – validating and amplifying Pete's emotion in the broader organizational setting and shifting the temporal focus of the ST – help Pete to show increased motivation for promoting digitalization. Figure 3 illustrates the detailed unfolding of ERO practices in the example.

These two ethnographic examples illustrate how the emotion regulation process unfolds across stages, with theme drivers using a combination of noticing, validating, and amplifying emotions, followed by demonstrating benefits, contextualizing emotions, and shifting the temporal focus to drive emotional reappraisal. This process helps theme receivers reframe their emotional responses and engage more constructively with the strategic themes.

Toward a Generalizable Model

To synthesize our findings, we developed a process model (Figure 4) that captures middle managers' emotion regulation of others (ERO) during strategy implementation. The model outlines three interrelated and dynamically unfolding phases: understanding ER status, interpersonal ER tuning, and encouraging emotional reappraisal. Each phase comprises specific micro-practices, and the model emphasizes the interplay and feedback between them, rather than a fixed linear sequence.

The process typically begins with understanding ER status, where middle managers ('theme drivers') attend to verbal and non-verbal cues to assess how team members ('theme receivers') emotionally appraise the strategic theme. This interpretive work, drawing on core affect expression and appraisal cues, lays the foundation for any further regulatory effort. However, perceiving is not a standalone activity; it is tightly coupled with the tuning that follows. In some cases, middle managers also return to perception practices mid-conversation to recalibrate their reading of the emotional field.

In the interpersonal ER tuning phase, theme drivers respond to identified emotions through acknowledgement, validation, and, where useful, amplification. These practices are not applied uniformly; rather, they are selected based on ongoing feedback from the group. For example, validation might be repeated or deepened before any reappraisal

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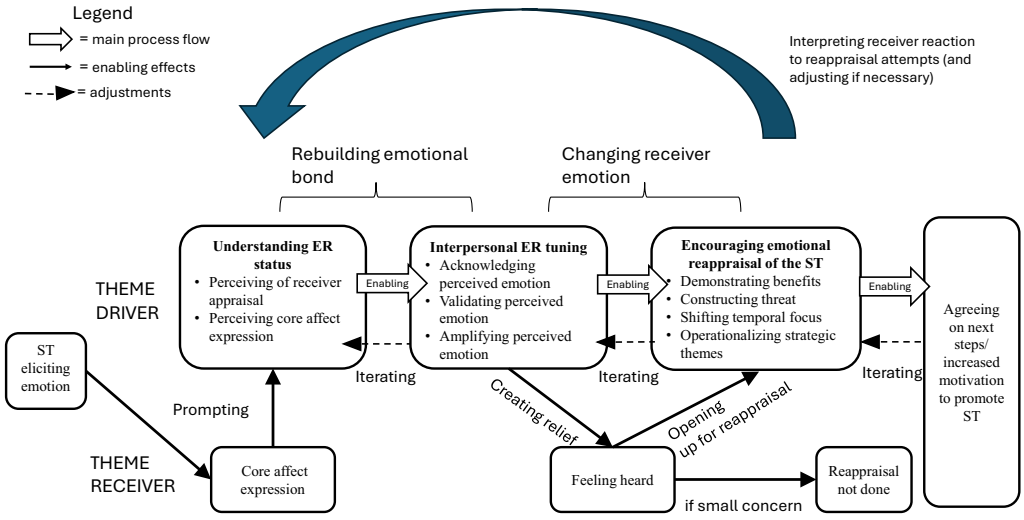

Figure 4. A process model of the sequences of middle managerial emotion regulation of others (ERO) in strategy implementation [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

can be attempted. Amplification may be used to strengthen collective salience before a strategic reframing. Thus, practices in this phase are mutually enabling: validation reinforces emotional bonds, which enhances the effectiveness of later reappraisal; amplification strengthens focus, which can make reappraisal more resonant.

Once sufficient emotional openness has been created, theme drivers move toward encouraging emotional reappraisal. This phase involves reframing the strategic theme to shift team members' emotional orientation from resistance to engagement. Practices include demonstrating strategic benefits, constructing urgency (through threat), shifting temporal focus, and breaking abstract goals into concrete actions. Yet reappraisal efforts remain contingent: if the emotional groundwork has not been properly laid, these interventions often fail or backfire, prompting a return to earlier practices.

Crucially, our model captures this recursive movement between phases. Rather than progressing neatly from one phase to the next, middle managers move back and forth in response to emergent emotional cues. ERO is therefore not about executing a fixed set of steps, but about sequencing and adapting practices based on interpersonal and situational dynamics.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a process model of how middle managers regulate the negative emotions of others in meetings to support strategy implementation. Drawing on a 9-month ethnographic study, we show that emotion regulation of others (ERO) is not a matter of applying isolated techniques, but a temporally unfolding and dialogic process. Specifically, we identify three interconnected phases of ERO: understanding ER status, interpersonal ER tuning, and encouraging emotional reappraisal. These phases, detailed in Table III and visually represented in Figure 4, illustrate how

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middle managers adapt their behaviour moment by moment in response to evolving emotional dynamics, using interpersonal micro-practices to transform negative emotions into engagement.

Understanding *how* Middle Managers' Emotion Regulation Facilitates Strategy Implementation

Our findings provide a missing piece to the puzzle of how middle managers steer strategy implementation (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Weiser et al., 2020) and add to emotion regulation research more generally (Bradley et al., 2024; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2022; Troth et al., 2018; Vuori, 2024; Vuori and Huy, 2022). While studies on ER have recognized that emotionally skilled middle managers can recognize others' emotions and influence them (Huy, 2002; Huy and Zott, 2019; Vuori and Huy, 2022), we have taken a step further by offering a structured process model that specifies *how* such influence happens in practice. We address a key theoretical tension in the literature: although validation has been shown to be an effective response to workplace emotions (Bradley et al., 2024), strategy research often promotes reappraisal as a solution to resistance (e.g., Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017). Our findings bridge this divide by demonstrating that reappraisal is most effective when it is preceded by emotional groundwork, especially acknowledgement and validation. For example, in our data, reappraisal efforts were successful only after middle managers had built emotional connections by acknowledging and validating team members' emotional states.

More specifically, our analysis advances research on strategic emotion regulation by illustrating the sequential progression of ERO, whereas prior theory has focused on the effects of specific ERO techniques in relative isolation (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2008). We provide a novel insight into the dynamics of ERO by explaining how middle managers engage in moment-by-moment ERO processes (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2008; Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Troth et al., 2018) and sequences of emotion-response strategies, thereby unveiling the dynamic process of emotional regulation. Crucially, this process begins with validating the very emotions that may initially hinder change. In Table III, we link specific ERO practices to existing theoretical frameworks, including cognitive reappraisals (Gross, 1998), affective and temporal framing (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017), temporal framing (Huy and Zott, 2019), and embodied affect theory (Russell and Barrett, 1999). As demonstrated in our ethnographic flow figures (Figures 2 and 3), ERO unfolds through back-and-forth exchanges between middle managers (as theme drivers) and their teams (as theme receivers), with subtle feedback loops guiding the timing and intensity of regulation efforts. Our model (Figure 4) also clarifies the *outcomes* of ERO. Practices such as acknowledging frustration, validating concern, and amplifying shared disappointment do not merely reduce emotional tension; they prepare the emotional ground for subsequent strategic reappraisal. From this base, middle managers can encourage constructive emotional shifts by reframing strategic benefits, instilling a sense of urgency, or reducing pressure through temporal reframing. Although we focus on emotional change within the meetings themselves, these short-term reappraisals, such as expressions of renewed motivation, relaxed resistance, or verbal commitments, are foundational for sustained engagement in the strategic theme. In doing so, we respond to calls for greater attention to the sequence of emotion regulation

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strategies (Bradley et al., 2024; Renault and Tarakci, 2023; Vuori and Huy, 2022). Rather than privileging validation or reappraisal, we show that it is their temporal coordination that makes emotional influence effective. Strategy implementation is thus supported not by deploying the 'right' tactic in isolation but by sequencing multiple ERO practices in a context-sensitive and relationally attuned way.

Broader Implications for Emotion Regulation Research

Our findings also contribute to the broader literature on emotion regulation of others (ERO) by conceptualizing ERO not as a set of discrete interventions, but as a temporally unfolding and interdependent process. While prior research has identified individual techniques, such as emotional validation, display regulation, and reappraisal, as important tools for influencing others' affect (e.g., Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Huy and Zott, 2019), it has offered limited insight into how these techniques work in relation to one another over time. Our analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of any single technique depends on when and how it is deployed in relation to others. For example, we show that attempts at reappraisal, such as reframing a strategic issue, were only effective after negative emotions had first been acknowledged and validated. This highlights a key theoretical insight: ERO practices are not only additive but mutually enabling and temporally dependent.

Second, our process perspective offers a more granular understanding of how emotional influence unfolds through moment-by-moment interactions. Rather than treating emotion regulation as a static event or one-time adjustment, we capture how middle managers adapt their ERO practices in real time in response to subtle affective cues from their teams. This dynamic, responsive view of ERO aligns with emerging interest in the micro-temporal dynamics of organizational life (e.g., Barsade and Knight, 2015) and adds emotional depth to research on interactional strategy work. In this way, we open the 'black box' of emotional reactions as they evolve within meetings – an important but underexplored dimension of how strategies are either enacted or undermined through emotional undercurrents.

By elucidating the role of middle managers, a group distinct from boards, founders, or TMTs, our analysis has specific implications for the broader literature on emotion regulation in organizations. While prior work has examined how senior leaders engage in ER (e.g., Hodgkinson and Healey, 2018; Huy and Zott, 2019; Vuori and Tushman, 2024), we highlight the unique demands and opportunities of ERO at the middle-managerial level. Middle managers work through dialogic interaction, relational closeness, and contextual sensitivity– factors that shape the specific micro-practices they use to guide emotional transitions.

Importantly, while we trace the evolution of ERO across multiple meetings, our focus is on immediate emotional outcomes rather than long-term behavioural change. Following Heaphy (2017) and Satterstrom et al. (2021), we argue that these local emotional shifts, such as a team member relaxing their opposition or expressing new curiosity, are not trivial. They are micro-foundations of strategic change, helping rebuild trust and sustain emotional momentum. By focusing on these immediate emotional effects, our study captures how middle managers use interpersonal emotion regulation practices to address resistance at its earliest stages, helping sustain implementation processes that might otherwise falter.

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In this sense, our study contributes to a growing body of work on emotion in strategy by revealing how interpersonal ER tuning, particularly practices of validation and amplification, creates the emotional resonance (Raffaelli et al., 2019) necessary for strategy to take root. Our findings complement and extend research on cognitive sensemaking (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992), sociopolitical interpretation (Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005), and micro-practices of middle-managerial sensegiving (Balogun and Rouleau, 2017; Weiser et al., 2020) by demonstrating that emotional transformation underpins these more visible strategic behaviours.

Ultimately, we position middle managers not only as implementers of strategy but also as emotional leaders who regulate, reshape, and reframe the affective environment on which strategy unfolds.

Practical Implications

Our findings also offer guidance for middle managers, strategy professionals, and organizational designers seeking to improve the emotional foundations of strategy implementation. In particular, our study shows that regulating team members' emotions is not about choosing the 'right' technique (e.g., validation or reappraisal) in isolation, but about sequencing these techniques effectively. For middle managers, this means learning to recognize and validate emotional responses before attempting to shift mindsets. Too often, managers jump to solutions or try to reframe resistance prematurely, an approach that can backfire. Instead, effective implementation relies on cultivating 'emotional timing', where managers legitimize negative reactions first, then guide emotional shifts toward engagement.

For top managers and HR professionals, our study underscores the need to train and support middle managers in emotional skills, particularly in reading affective cues and responding in ways that build and strengthen emotional bonds and momentum. These findings resonate with leadership research on emotional intelligence and relational leadership, suggesting that middle managers serve not only as implementers but also as emotionally competent leaders. Leadership development programmes would benefit from integrating modules on interpersonal emotion regulation, adapted to the specific demands of strategic settings.

More broadly, we recommend that organizations treat strategy meetings not only as cognitive alignment forums but also as emotional arenas. Structuring space for emotional expression, especially during periods of change, can prevent resistance from growing and help generate shared commitment to strategic goals. As strategy work becomes increasingly distributed and emotionally complex, particularly in hybrid or remote environments, emotional resistance should be seen not as a barrier to overcome but as a relational signal to work with. Our findings provide a roadmap for engaging such dynamics productively and respectfully.

Boundary Conditions and Future Research

Our study opens several promising avenues for future research, which can deepen our understanding of the role of emotions and affective processes during strategy implementation (Healey and Hodgkinson, 2017; Hodgkinson and Healey, 2022; Raffaelli et al., 2019; Vuori and Huy, 2016, 2022; Vuori and Tushman, 2024).

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First, understanding the sequences in middle manager ERO process calls for further studies to explore the long-term impacts of strategic ERO on organizational culture, team dynamics, and overall performance (Weiser et al., 2020). This would involve longitudinal research to trace the effects of ERO practices over time, providing insights into how emotional regulation contributes to sustainable strategic success (Vuori and Huy, 2022). While our study provides valuable insights into the sequential nature of middle managers' ERO during strategy meetings, it opens avenues for deeper exploration of the temporal dynamics underpinning these processes. Our findings suggest that ERO unfolds as a series of interconnected phases, but we acknowledge that many open questions remain regarding the temporal aspect of how these phases interact over time. Future research could investigate how the timing, duration, and pace of these ERO practices influence their effectiveness. For example, does the validation of negative emotions need to occur immediately to mitigate emotional resistance effectively, or can delays in this process compromise strategic alignment? Similarly, how does the interval between validating emotions and guiding reappraisal impact team dynamics and emotional commitment to strategic goals? Temporal aspects could also be examined in relation to broader organizational timelines and rhythms, such as the cyclical nature of strategy implementation, feedback loops, or external pressures like market shifts or crises. Incorporating longitudinal methodologies could help uncover how ERO practices evolve across different stages of strategy implementation and whether certain emotional states resurface or transform as strategies progress.

Second, we envision that future research could, through in-depth qualitative research, illuminate additional routines to detect the weak emotional signals crucial for strategy implementation (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011). Such an approach would allow us to address the following questions: What are the tools, practices, and activities used to sense weak emotional signals (Hodgkinson and Healey, 2022)? Are there practices that middle managers use to systematically suppress emotional signals (such as those in Gross's (1998) process category of response modulation)? How do such routines for detecting weak emotional signals change over time? Research could also delve more deeply into the role of early signals of identity transition during strategy implementation to consider how emotions are regulated when the identity fit varies strongly across the organization (see also Sanchez-Burks and Huy, 2009), whether there are nuances that facilitate detection of threats requiring adjustments in ERO practices, and whether we can develop routines that enhance strategy implementation through awareness of the weak identity threat signals emerging. Also, studying different organizational contexts and cultures (Ashton-James and Ashkanasy, 2008; Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) would reveal how specific environmental factors or organizational structures influence the ERO process in strategy implementation.

Third, we have focused on negative emotions because these often surface most strongly as resistance in strategy implementation and pose immediate challenges for middle managers seeking to sustain momentum. Understanding how such emotions can be acknowledged and constructively redirected is therefore critical to explaining how implementation succeeds or falters. We do recognize that not all negative emotions are undesirable or malleable; some reflect legitimate concerns or enduring scepticism that cannot or should not be converted into enthusiasm. Our analysis is framed by the aim of understanding how middle managers can enable support for implementation, which positions emotional redirection as

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a central task in our study. At the same time, while we have focused on negative emotions, future research should also consider the role of positive emotions in strategic change in general and strategy implementation in particular. This could include analysis of enthusiasm, excitement, hope, or elevation that are usually needed to move things forward. Negative and positive emotions are also interlinked, and studying the shifts in affective dynamics is a particularly important area for future studies. Our findings are grounded in the context of top-down strategy implementation, where middle managers regulate emotions within formal, recurring team meetings. The model we propose is most applicable to structured, hierarchical leader–follower interactions, where middle managers act as intermediaries between senior leadership and teams. We do not claim generalizability to emergent strategies or emotionally charged exchanges with external stakeholders such as customers. These boundary conditions offer a basis for future research to explore how emotional regulation unfolds in more fluid, cross-boundary, or bottom-up contexts.

CONCLUSION

Building on recent advances in the psychological and emotional approaches to strategy implementation (Bradley et al., 2024; Weiser et al., 2020), our study offers a unique qualitative view into how middle managers regulate the emotions of others in strategy implementation. Based on our revealing case analysis, we show how the emotion regulation of others unfolds in a process that drives strategy implementation. Our study specifically highlights the relevance of understanding the various forms that middle management ERO can take. We hope that our efforts will spur research interest in both middle manager ER and the fine-grained unfolding of ERO processes more generally.

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